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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS IS SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR ON SLEIMAN TRIP,
JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION

REF: IIR 6857039908

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Minister of Defense Elias Murr told us he had been briefing President Sleiman regularly to prepare Sleiman for his upcoming meetings in Washington. He complained September 20 about Saad Hariri's demand that Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Kahwagi place Sunni officers in key LAF Intelligence Directorate positions. Murr is looking forward to the October 5-6 Joint Military Commission. Murr said that his father, longtime political leader Michel Murr, favors having very few National Dialogue sessions before spring elections so as to avoid giving too much to the Hezbollah-led opposition. On the 2009 election, Murr thought that having a one-day voting period was possible from a security stand point but admitted that administrative challenges might lead to a two-day scenario. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, DATT and ODC chief, met with Defense Minister Elias Murr on September 20 for a wide-ranging discussion of military and political matters. Murr opened the meeting by complaining that majority leader Saad Hariri is pressuring the LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi and LAF G-2 Intelligence Director Edmond Fadel to appoint Sunni officers in the LAF Intelligence Directorate. Murr said Hariri is meddling in areas which should not concern him, specifically citing Hariri's insistence on naming the officer who deals with internal military intelligence affairs. Murr told us frankly that he had "given" Hariri G-2 positions for Sunni officers that had more political importance such as the Deputy G-2 and the G-2 Director for the Sunni dominated Northern Region. Murr said Hariri is being influenced by previous Deputy G-2 G Ghassan Balaa, and that Hariri had talked about all Sunni officers resigning from the LAF if the demand is not met. (Note: The G-2 for Military Intelligence perform counter-intelligence and criminal investigation functions inside the army. DefMin Murr does not want to politicize this position as it will hinder the ability of the Army to carry out investigations without accusations of political motivation. This position has investigative authority for incidents such as the January 27 violence in south Beirut and the May clashes in west Beirut.

End note.)

¶13. (C) The new G-2 positions were designated on September 19 (Ref A). Murr said that Kahwagi is currently refusing demands to appoint officers inside the intelligence directorate at headquarters despite heavy pressure from Hariri and Hizballah. Murr emphasized that Kahwagi is willing to compromise with Hizballah on some positions, but adamantly refusing to put Hizballah-designated candidates in the G-2 Directorate.

SLEIMAN MEETING WITH SECDEF GATES

¶14. (C) Murr does not anticipate that President Sleiman will discuss sensitive internal topics with Secretary of Defense Gates during their September 25 meeting in Washington. Instead, Murr anticipates that Sleiman will focus on the strong military-to-military ties between the LAF and the Department of Defense and thank the Secretary for his strong support. Sleiman will also stress the need for the LAF to become stronger in order to fill its role as the only legitimate armed force inside Lebanon. Even so, Sleiman will stay away from the idea that the LAF will take, or integrate, Hizballah into the LAF. Sleiman will be glad if one day the LAF can integrate Hizballah's men and arms, said Murr, but "we cannot talk openly about it now." Murr told us that he has been preparing Sleiman, one or two times a week, for his trip to the United States and that Sleiman will be fully conversant in all topics for the LAF. Murr related that many officers in the LAF are "speaking bad words" about Hizballah

BEIRUT 00001386 002 OF 003

and assessed that Hizballah support inside the LAF is waning.

JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION, 5-6 OCTOBER

¶15. (C) Murr has directed that the upcoming Joint Military Commission (JMC) with the Department of Defense on October 5-6 be held at the Ministry of Defense. Murr has coordinated with Kahwagi on the substance of the JMC and has delegated coordination authority for this event to Kahwagi's assistant, Major Ziad Barakat. Murr stressed that both he and Kahwagi want to accomplish a great deal in talks with the U.S. in the coming months. Regarding the minutes of the JMC, Murr is not sure if he will need a cabinet decision to sign them. If yes, he will send them a greatly redacted version for approval as he does not want Hizballah cabinet member Fneish to know the details of what coordination he has made with the United States. Ambassador asked about reports that meetings of the national unity cabinet last for hours, with long discussions of details. "This is the worst Lebanese government since I was born," quipped Murr.

POLITICS: MICHEL MURR URGING
LIMITED NATIONAL DIALOGUE SESSIONS

¶16. (C) Turning to politics, Murr was critical of March 14 stalwart and Progressive Socialist Party Leader Walid Jumblatt. The recent Hizballah reconciliation meetings with Jumblatt's representatives are pushing Jumblatt away from the limited agenda of National Defense at the National Dialogue and towards expanding the agenda, which Hizballah favors. Murr was adamant that the agenda remain focused on Hizballah's arms, casting this as a binary choice: either we have arms for Lebanon, or we have arms for Iran, which is it? Murr told us that he does not trust Jumblatt, but is confident that Jumblatt will not make a political pact with Hizballah prior to the May 2009 elections.

¶17. (C) Murr's father, longtime political boss Michel Murr, is representing the Greek Orthodox community at the National Dialogue. Murr told us that his father is advising all members to accept as few sessions as possible prior to the

May 2009 elections. The reason is that Hizballah and the opposition will seek concessions throughout the Dialogue, Murr said. (Septel covers Ambassador's September 22 call on Michel Murr.) Why should we give them anything before the elections, he asked? Michel Murr specifically has advised that there be no more than two additional sessions before the May 2009 elections: one immediately following the designation of the next U.S. President on 5 November (already scheduled) and one possibly in February. Murr said he is rebuffing President Sleiman's calls that as Defense Minister he participate in the Dialogue for the issue of national defense strategy. Murr told us he is insisting all of Hizballah's rockets be under the control of the Army before he joins the discussion. He claimed that although Sleiman agrees with this pre-condition, he recognizes it as impractical for the time being. Hizballah wants to say that their rockets are legal and that their 20,000 soldiers are in the Army now, said Murr.

2009 ELECTIONS ON ONE DAY POSSIBLE

¶8. (C) At this time, it appears as if the May 2009 elections will be held on one day, Murr indicated. The relevant Parliamentary committee has just approved that proposal. While Interior Minister Baroud has complained that he does not have the security forces to carry out the elections on one day, Murr told us that he assured Baroud that the LAF will be there to help him and there will be plenty of troops available for all assigned missions. Murr opined that it may be quite difficult from an administrative perspective to hold elections on one day, but there is no security-related reason preventing it. Murr assessed the alternate scenario as elections on two days, over two weekends. However, if the Hizballah-led opposition perceived that they had done worse than expected in districts that vote in the first weekend,

BEIRUT 00001386 003 OF 003

they would take steps to disrupt the process the second weekend to assure their victory, he predicted.

SISON